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SUBJECT: MOSCOW'S SCIENCE MUSEUMS: EXPERIMENTING WITH SUCCESS

¶1. SUMMARY: As Moscow increasingly becomes a tourist destination, science museums could play a role as second tier destinations, but funding and attracting visitors remain a challenge. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Embassy EST intern recently visited many of Moscow's science museums.

This Way to the Dinosaurs: Orlov Museum of Paleontology

¶3. The Paleontology museum boasts the world's largest collection of Permian fossils which date from about 250-300 million years ago. Impressive in its size, the Paleontology museum is tucked away in the outer edges of Moscow. The design of the building is friendly, expansive, and striking. High ceilings echo the effect of giant skeletons of bygone animals. Bas-relief tile frescoes adorn the walls and ceiling providing patrons a glimpse of the animals in their full form.

¶4. The deputy director spoke with us at length concerning the museum's future. According to his records, approximately 100,000 visitors tour the institution per year. Every year the staff changes and reshapes some exhibits. The museum has staged traveling exhibits to the United States, Puerto Rico, Japan, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. The museum is funded primarily (90%) through the Russian Academy of Sciences. The city of Moscow pays an additional 10% for utilities and other operating expenses. Ticket sales also contribute to the museum budget. Drawing on kids' interest in dinosaurs and fossils, the museum sponsors lecture events, a Kids' Paleontology Table, excavation exercises, and art contests. The number of visitors has increased over the past few years. Many children visit the museum either with their parents or on a school field trip.

Factories, Planes and Inventions: Polytechnical Museum

¶5. The Moscow Polytechnical Museum gives visitors the opportunity to explore a variety of different scientific areas including space, photography, mining, flight, chemistry, electronics, robotics, and meteorology. Built in 1877, the building is an outstanding example of Russian Revival architecture. Scale models of factories, aircraft, and inventions adorn the museum's many rooms. The original basket of the air-balloon used by Mendeleyev (organizer of the modern Periodic Table of the Elements) is on display in the museum. The first nuclear bomb is represented. Important industries within Russia are also showcased including steel production, chemical enterprises, and hydroelectric power plants. A short summary of each item, in both Russian and English, is placed next to each exhibit. Exhibits range from alternative energy resources to space food.

Eco-Consciousness at Timiryazev State Museum of Biology

¶6. Nestled in a quaint section of town near the U.S. Embassy, the State Museum of Biology showcases nature, experimentation, and development. During the summer of 2007, the museum is focusing on the benefits of recycling. For this exhibit, the museum partnered with the ecological program sponsored by the government of Moscow, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Cornell University. On display are costumes that students have created from ordinary trash. Informational material posted on the wall provides the decomposition times of particular items and landfill usage across the world. Taxidermy animals are prominently displayed throughout the museum. Models of mushroom varieties provide a glimpse into the traditional Russian pastime of mushroom hunting. A disturbing but historically interesting exhibit includes details of the experiments done by Dr. Ivan Pavlov, the world-famous Nobel laureate and physiologist, on dogs. While the museum lacks the interactive feel of those in the United States, an area devoted to human development features a painted ceiling reminiscent of a prehistoric cave painting. Most of the museum's visitors are children on school outings.

The Gems of the Moscow State University Geology Museum

¶7. Moscow State University, located on the Vorobyov Hills, maintains its own collection of geological phenomena, which provide students unique opportunities to examine and complete research. An impressive display covering five floors of the immense university includes samples from around the world. Boasting a large collection of soils from various terrains, the geology museum contributes toward a better understanding of environmental climate change, as many of the soil samples were taken decades ago. Rocks, ores, gemstones, and minerals from around the world sparkle in display cases. Depictions of geological activity explain volcanic activity, meteor impacts, and deep sea beds. Students studying geology and geography often attend lectures in a special auditorium within the

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museum. The museum is not open to the public unless special arrangements are made. All university students may enter the museum free of charge with their student identification card.

Is it All Happening at the Moscow City Zoo?

¶8. Although not up to the standards of Western zoos, the Moscow City Zoo is wildly popular among Muscovite families with young children. A large pond with swans, ducks, and other aquatic fowl is in the center of each of the zoo's two sections, while pens with land animals surround these ponds. Compared with American zoos, the pens are smaller and less natural looking, though each animal's habitat appears sufficient. While guidebooks and expats warn that the zoo is shabby by Western standards, gradual improvements are being made. A special section for young children contains pens with farm animals, a playground, and a few small amusement park rides. A new "exoterium" building houses exotic reptiles, fish and insects, and can be entered for an additional fee on top of the general zoo admission.

¶9. COMMENT: Moscow's scientific treasures are not as well known to tourists as the city's historical and art collections. Colorful and interactive displays to entertain and educate children have not yet penetrated the dour museum atmosphere. For Westerners accustomed to lights, sounds, and hands-on museum experiences, the quiet atmosphere of Moscow's science museums could feel subdued and old-fashioned. Despite their potential, these museums will likely remain underappreciated until they upgrade their displays and adopt coherent marketing strategies.

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